

Boozing *vs. Losing*

Will a happy-hour habit blow your attempt to slim down—or strangely, could it actually help?

By Karen Ansel, R.D.

➔ Alcohol and your weight have a tricky relationship. So tricky, in fact, that experts have had a tough time nailing down exactly why some women wind up with a beer gut (or butt) while others drink daily and never seem to gain a pound.

Here's what we know: Your average drink—beer, wine, martini, pick your poison—is usually a combination of carbs, sugar, and ethanol (pure alcohol). When it goes down the hatch, it makes a pit stop at your stomach, where some of the alcohol is absorbed through the lining and into your bloodstream, giving you that initial buzz. The carbs and sugar go the traditional digestive route, while ethanol, a toxin, is diverted to the liver.

This is when that innocent little drink starts messing with your internal fat incinerator. Ethanol has no nutritional value, so your body burns it off first. That means any remaining calories in your stomach—whether they're from the margarita or the chips and guacamole you had with it—will likely be stored as fat. And the more fattening the foods you eat, the easier the calories are to store.

A moment on the lips, forever on the hips?

(Bear in mind that research published in *Physiology & Behavior* found that alcohol makes us focus on immediate pleasure and ignore the consequences, which often results in eating junk food.) Unlike protein and carbs, which require some energy for the body to break down and store, fat can directly deposit itself, so those chips are first in line to be plastered to your thighs.

Still, the situation might not be as bleak as it appears, because the real problem may not be drinking itself, but how often and how hard we hit the bottle.

Drink and Shrink?

Earlier this year, the *Archives of Internal Medicine* published what may be the best

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Researchers believe that the bodies of long-term moderate drinkers somehow adapt to metabolize alcohol differently than heavy or occasional drinkers. They use more energy, burning the calories in the drink—or even more than that—while digesting it, says Lu Wang, M.D., Ph.D., the lead researcher of the study and an instructor in medicine at Brigham and Women's

crowd, this “binge” behavior is on the rise, according to a 2009 *Addiction* study). “Your body adjusts metabolically to the amount you drink, and when you don’t drink regularly, your body can’t adjust,” says Wang. Instead of learning to disregard those nutritionally empty calories, your body automatically stores them—as fat. It’s akin to tossing old clothes you don’t

Look Great, Feel Great!

Women's Health

Drink This, Not That!

Here's a taste of what you'll find in the new book from the authors of *Eat This, Not That!*

At Chevys Fresh Mex

| | |
|------------------------------|--|
| Mango Mojito 190 calories | Spicy Mango Margarita 460 calories |
|------------------------------|--|

At Olive Garden

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Wild Berry Bellini 160 calories | Strawberry- Mango Frozen Margarita 350 calories |
|---------------------------------------|--|

At Outback Steakhouse

| | |
|--|--|
| BV Coastal Pinot Noir 150 calories | Newcastle Brown Ale 180 calories |
|--|--|

► For more smart drink swaps, order a copy of the book at WomensHealthMag.com/DrinkThis.

for them with fewer calories elsewhere. “These women know how to moderate how much they drink, so it makes sense that they’d moderate what they eat as well,” says Robert Klesges, Ph.D., a professor of preventive medicine at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center in Memphis. The *Archives* study found that these women also exercise more, which knocks off additional calories.

Another thing that helped: The women in the *Archives* study were served no more than two four-ounce glasses of wine or two 1.5-ounce shots of liquor a day. In real life, you’re likely to be handed far more than that by a bartender or waitress—20 to 45 percent more, according to a 2009 study in the journal *Alcohol*. And we’re not much better when left to our own devices. “Eyeballing the right amount is very difficult,” says William C. Kerr, Ph.D., a senior scientist at the Alcohol Research Group in Emeryville, California. “Most of us don’t even know how much we should be shooting for, so overpouring is typical.”

It’s especially easy to overdo it with vino, given that the average wineglass these days looks big enough to hold a school of fish. So a bottle of light beer may be your best bet. “Unlike wine and mixed drinks, it’s portion controlled—the bottle is right there with the calories printed on it,” says Lisa Young, Ph.D., R.D., author of *The Portion Teller Plan*. “It eliminates the guesswork.”